

Why Form a Church Writing Group? A Case for Praying with Our Pens

On my first major road trip as a child, our family was heading for a church conference near Sante Fe, New Mexico. We drove for hours across that flat part of west Texas where the highway always wears a dust cover. When my parents spotted mountains on the horizon, they entered a state of awe. When they drew closer to the majestically-shaped, snow-capped wonders that reach into the sky, it was love at first sight.

“Look at this,” they kept exclaiming, stunned by the miles of gorgeous scenery. *Oohs* and *aahs* filled the car as landscapes they had never seen stretched before them in glorious color. Amazed by the beauty of it all, they couldn’t get enough of the breathtaking views. They felt as if they had just driven into the most vivid painting that they had ever seen and had become part of this living picture.

Then, as they sat glowing in their front row seats, they suddenly remembered that their young daughter was in the back of the station wagon with her nose in a book, missing this magical experience. “Look around,” they said more loudly. “Do you see all of this?” Persistently trying to engage me in their magnificent moment, they asked, “What do you think of these mountains?”

I finally lifted my head, glanced out the window, and paused. “I saw them,” I said seconds later and returned to my book.

I think of that story often, not just because my dad keeps telling it, but because even after all these years, I’m still so capable of overlooking what most deserves my time and attention. I miss the point too often. Overlooking the life-giving experiences that I need to savor has become a frequent habit.

Maybe you also struggle with how to *not* miss what matters. Overlooking the important is a temptation we face everywhere we go, at any time. It happens particularly often when we read Scripture. The Bible contains breathtaking stories with the potential

to leave us awestruck when we are open to them. When we pay attention, these stories have proven power to change us.

But so often we settle for something lesser. “I already saw that,” we think. “I’ve heard it before,” we say. We overlook divine masterpieces when God invites us to a better experience of them. Instead of skimming a story we could step inside it and linger there. Learning how to find our way into a passage, then spending time there to look around, is the way we see something new.

This has been the continual experience of seekers and disciples through the ages. When we pray as we read, asking, “God, what do you want me to hear in these words?” unexpected insights often come. When we ask, “What do you want me to see in this that I’ve overlooked?” we notice new possibilities. Praying, “What do you want this story to make me feel?” can move us to act in ways that we haven’t tried before.

In her poem “Sometimes,” Mary Oliver writes:

Instructions for a Life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

Because our time seems too short and our to-do lists too long, we let stress take our breath away instead of letting beauty do that. God’s people grow so engrossed in lesser pursuits that we don’t recognize what we’re missing. Too often we skip the “Pay attention” and “Be astonished” steps in the poet’s instructions and quickly land on her fourth sentence.

Because using words is crucial to the Church’s urgent work, we may jump into the “tell about it” stage before we experience, or re-experience, the truth that we are trying to tell. But if we take the time to steep ourselves in fresh experiences of God’s grace that come as we look for them, our words will bear the sound of the genuine, the accent of authentic astonishment. In fresh experiences of God’s grace, we find the words we need to convey that gift.

If we bypass current, firsthand experiences of faith, we are only able to repeat what others tell us to say or what we hope to remember. We find ourselves offering more opinions and less testimony, and what a difference that makes. It’s easier to argue with someone about their opinion than about their experience. The world seems hungry for meaning that rises from firsthand experiences right now, that unique light someone offers because it seems to be needed. This must be why memoirs and creative non-fiction have become bestselling genres.

The Church has always known the power of testimony. We yearn for thoughtful stories about true experiences of God’s grace that will lead us to new experiences of that grace. The Church’s story teaches us to see and tell our own. It has a Word to satisfy

spiritual hunger, but so often we reduce the power of the Church's Story to mere formulas or particular ideologies. What theologian Walter Brueggemann reminds preachers in *Finally Comes the Poet* is true for writers in the church as well:

When the text comes to speak about this alternative life wrought by God, the text must use poetry. There is no other way to speak. We know about that future—we know surely—but we do not know concretely enough to issue memos and blueprints. We know only enough to sing songs and speak poems. That, however, is enough. We stake our lives on such poems.

The preacher renders a world not known in advance. It requires no great cleverness to speak such a world, but it requires closeness to those texts that know secrets that mediate life. These texts voice life that is given nowhere else. The preaching moment is a moment for the gift of God's life in the midst of our tired alienation. For this the church and indeed the world waits. They wait, until, finally the poet comes, until finally the poet comes. (41)

The work of sharing this Word involves listening to it, letting it astonish us, and learning how to tell about our experience of it in ways that connect its truth to our lives, our questions, and the pain, confusion, joy, hope, and wonder we feel. Our religious clichés are never as interesting or illuminating as letting the genuine speak for itself. When our words are born out of an astonished gasp, they start to sing and gather a wider audience.

What lines would the Church write if we approached Scripture—and God's world—with the holy curiosity and expectancy that poets take to the woods, the shore, or any of the places where they pay attention and listen? When we stand on the well-worn biblical paths until we hear something fresh, unexpected sounds *do* grow louder than the thoughts that first brought us there. Words previously unnoticed in a Scripture text will suddenly catch our gaze and lead us farther than we have walked before.

So why form a church writing group? Because whether we claim the word "writer" for ourselves or not, reading Scripture with a notebook and pen in hand can make us more attentive to its verses. The writing process will make us more curious if we listen for God and use our pens to write down what we think we hear. As we interact with the text and move from the Bible to the notebook and back again, we find ourselves leaning into the pages of both in order to have a more intimate conversation. We consider words that we haven't thought about before. We wonder why that particular phrase was important to the gospel writer, and why that arrangement of the sentence might matter to us. And when we bring our notebooks to the table where others have brought their own to share, our conversation around the passage deepens.

The Writing Group Experiment for Adults and Youth

Welcome!

We call this writing group project an “experiment,” because we want to learn how the practice of writing might encourage spiritual formation within congregations. We have questions about what the most effective ways to equip church writing groups might be. We believe that the best way to discover this information is to invite you to gather a writing group within your church that will meet for at least four sessions in the months of September/October to test drive the experience, then listen to what you discovered.

What’s not a question for us is whether or not church writing groups offer their participants an opportunity to deepen their spiritual lives. We’re convinced that they do, because we’ve seen that happen firsthand.

We hope that will be your experience as well. Use this guide to help your group get started. As you engage in this experiment, take note of what works for you and what does not. We want to hear as much about your sessions as you would like to share. Taking the time to complete the pre-experiment and post-experiment surveys will give us helpful information for developing an upcoming resource on church writing groups.

We think the beauty of these groups is their potential for all ages from kindergarteners to retirees. Some church writing groups have been intergenerational. One such group (that its leader described as “one of the best things I’ve ever done in church”) included a 17-year-old and a 70-year-old. To help facilitate this intergenerational connection, we have one set of session materials for children and another set for youth and adults.

If you plan to have a writing group for younger youth only (say, middle school), you may want to look at some of the materials for older children and see if that is more helpful or would offer you more additional support than simply using the material for the adults. If you have a writing group for older youth only (say, high school), you may find the adult materials sufficient for them or you may choose to add some age-specific writing prompts.

As you engage your groups, we want to be helpful. If you have questions or concerns along the way, don’t hesitate to contact Carol Younger (carol@helwys.com) for information about the materials for adults and youth or any questions about the project in

general. Contact Jayne Gammons (jaynestamp@cox.net) to discuss the details of the project for children. We pray that this experiment will be meaningful for all involved.

How to Get Started

Select your time and place

Choose dates, times, and a location that will suit your group well. Eight to ten writers would be a good number of participants, although you can have wonderful groups with as few as four or as many as fifteen. Many writing groups have met during their Sunday morning spiritual formation/Christian education program, but you may discover other times and places that will work well for you. Just be sure that your timeframe gives everyone an opportunity to share their writing and participate in the discussions.

Invite the Group

Think about those in your church who may love to write and invite them to join you for this four-session experiment. (You may decide to add a fifth session if some in your group want to write about all four parables.) Send email invitations to a variety of people: those who publish and those who haven't; those curious about writing and those who have journaled for years; bloggers and those who write interesting Christmas letters; people who might love to explore writing as a spiritual practice. You may want to announce this opportunity through your newsletter or other media forms, but remember that personal invites are often a more effective way to secure commitments.

When participants sign on to the project, give them a copy of "Why Form a Church Writing Group?" and the attached *Reflections* devotion to read before the first meeting.

Plan for the Initial Meeting (Session 1)

We designed the initial session outlined below to introduce your group to this experiment. If you prefer to use a parable for your first session, summarize some of the ideas outlined in the initial meeting plan, then have the group read, write about, and discuss the parable you chose instead of discussing and writing about Moses and the burning bush. If you do merge the initial session material with the parable session format, schedule a longer time for your first meeting, or condense some of the time allowed for the parable to meet your time constraints.

Choose Your Parables (Sessions 2-4)

Choose which parables you want to work with in sessions 2-4. Place the parables in whichever order you prefer, following our sequence or creating your own.

Feel free to diverge from this plan and improvise according to your church's needs. For instance, you could spend two weeks on one parable—one session on the prodigal son and the next one on his older brother.

Gather the Printed Materials You'll Need

Having group members look at the same version of Scripture during each session is helpful. Make sure each participant will have a copy of the Scripture text when you meet. During the week writers may find it helpful to explore other Scripture translations of the story.

Make copies of the writing prompts pages for whichever parables you choose to work with and give a copy to each participant. They may want to use these prompts in their daily work. Because the prompts rise out of the story and engage its themes, you may also choose to use a few or all of them in your sessions as individual 10-minute timed writing exercises, followed by time to share responses.

Guiding Your Group

Encourage Daily Writing

Nurturing spiritual formation is the purpose of this writing experience. Encourage your group members to read each parable and write about the parable *daily*. The writing prompts provided for each story are meant to help them explore the story.

Suggest that the group “free-write” in response to the prompts. Free-writing involves writing non-stop for a period of time. The idea is that keeping the pen moving across the pages helps the writer quickly think of new ideas that will flow onto the page and free the writer from editing themselves too much.

At the beginning of each session, you might allow the group a brief (5-10 minutes) opportunity to share their responses to the prompts from their daily writing on the previous session's parable. Remember that while these prompts are meant to help writers engage the text, the Scripture text itself is the primary prompt and it may lead the conversation in a different direction than expected as writers spend time with it.

Honor this Opportunity

Establish basic guidelines for the writing group and discuss these together so that this experiment will be a meaningful—and positive-- experience for everyone. Church writing groups can be sacred places for participants as they wrestle together with concerns and questions, learn to describe their faith experiences to one another, name their hopes, and express their fears.

Lead the group to assure each other from the start that their time together is an important opportunity to be shared. Before you gather around the sacred story, remind everyone how important it is to be respectful of each person. As the group leader, help the conversations flow, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. Be aware of those who may need encouragement or who may need to be more encouraging. Keep in mind that we're seeking spiritual formation rather than perfect prose.

Listen for the Moments to Add Clarity or Information

Be sure that the initial stage of this conversation about the Scripture text welcomes whatever feedback the group has to offer. Listen to the responses without wearing your editor hat. You're encouraging the writers to have a genuine interaction with the passage, raising their own questions and asking what its message might mean for them.

As conversation about the text unfolds, however, you may become aware of moments when some basic background information would help address particular questions, clarify confusing issues, or move the discussion forward. In preparing to guide the group, spend time with the text yourself—writing on it first, then looking for background information you may be curious about. We're providing a link to some brief information about the text [here](#) if you need it, or use whatever sources you prefer.

Writing groups learn about Scripture in ways that are intentionally different from other Bible study formats. We don't intend for the background material to be used fully, or turned into a teaching lesson. We hope it offers information to enrich the conversation rather than set the agenda for it.

After everyone has had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, (or at a point when a specific question arises that you have a response to), offer whatever additional information that will add meaning to the group's engagement with the text or direct their attention to something in the Scripture they may have overlooked or misread. Remember that if the background information comes before the initial conversation, it risks shutting off the dialogue. Encourage the process of letting the text speak directly to the reader first.

A Plan for Your Initial Meeting (Session 1)

- **Note:** This initial session easily can be merged with Session 2, where the first parable is introduced. Or you can use it as a separate introductory meeting for participants.
- **Introductions:** ask group members to introduce themselves and either describe what they love about writing, or respond to the question, "Why did you say yes to joining us today?"

- Using ideas from the “Why Form a Church Writing Group?” section, briefly describe why writing in response to Scripture may lead us to experience its truth in new ways.
- Read or summarize the *Reflections* devotion from Exodus 3:1-6. (See the attached devotion.) Ask the group to consider how many times we overlook amazing sights and why we do. Ask if the following idea is true to their experience: “Being attentive affects our spiritual well-being.” Do they agree with Rebecca’s statement: “I think God is always trying to tell us things”? Look at the sequence of events in verse 4: *When the LORD saw that he was coming to look, God called to him.* God pays attention to the fact that Moses is paying attention. Ask the following:

Why did God speak after Moses drew closer?

Why is this a good story for a church writing group?

How is writing a way of drawing closer to something through which God might speak?

What is most difficult about paying attention?

What’s most joyous about living attentively?

Ask the group to free-write (keep their pens moving across the page) for **5 minutes** as they respond to this prompt:

Think about the last few weeks. What may God have been trying to tell you that you might have missed?

Invite the group to share their responses.

Explain the format of the following sessions of the experiment.

Introduce the idea of praying the Scripture. Writers will read and reflect on a parable regularly until they hear something fresh through it. Mention that Richard Foster describes this kind of Scripture reading as a form of *meditative prayer*. St. Ignatius advised Christians to spend an hour each morning reading a Scripture passage and then reflecting on it with a journal. Encourage the group to read each parable daily and write about what they hear through its verses.

Take time to review details about this experiment: dates and times, meeting place, and what’s involved to make this a meaningful experience for everyone (i.e. respecting each other’s experiences). Encourage every participant to read and reflect on the parable each day prior to the next session.

Offer a prayer for the weeks ahead.

A Parable Session Format (Sessions 2-4)

- If this is not your first session with the parables, consider allowing **5-10 minutes** for participants to share some of their daily writing responses to the previous session’s

parable. Set a timer, if needed, so that the group can move into the next session's parable.

- Read this session's parable aloud.
- Have writers spend **5-10 minutes** "free-writing" about the passage your group just read. Use these questions, which begin every session, to prompt their response:

What words, phrases, or images caught your attention?

What questions did a verse raise for you?

Where do you find tension in the text?

What makes you uncomfortable with it?

What surprises you in the passages?

Does anything make you feel relieved? Excited?

What part of the story confuses you?

What part of the parable do you think you need to sit with for a while?

Have a copy of these questions available for each person or write them on a board.

- For **15-20 minutes**, have writers to share their responses to these prompts. You may want to slowly move through the text once again and have the writers speak about the verses that spoke to them. Encourage writers to note in their margins any new ideas from the group conversation that they would like to consider.
- Ask writers to circle one of the ideas they listed from the first set of prompts. Have them write for **10 minutes** in response to the question:

What might God be trying to tell me through this part of the story?

If time permits, participants could free write on additional prompts from the handout.

Allow **5-10 minutes** for volunteers to share their written responses.

Distribute the writing prompts page for the parable and encourage writers to spend further time with the parable. Use the prompts as guidance, but also respond to questions and thoughts that go beyond the prompts.

Close the session with a simple prayer or benediction, such as:

For the Word of God in Scripture,

For the Word of God around us,

For the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

❧ *Luke 15:1-2, 11-32* ❧

- What words, phrases, or images catch your attention?
What questions did a verse raise for you?
Where do you find tension in the text?
What surprises you in the passages?
Does anything make you feel relieved? Excited?
What part of the story confuses you?
What part you think you need to sit with for a while?
- Which son in the story do you relate to most?
- What would it take for you to empathize with the other one, who you like the least?
- What about the story makes you uncomfortable?
What do you think God wants you to hear that isn't easy for you to consider?
- What do you think the older son does next, after the story ends?
If he stays in the field, what goes through his mind?
If he goes into the party, how does he act?
- Describe your favorite scene in the parable and why that part of the plot intrigues you most.
- What does this tell us about God, and why is there no ending to the story?

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

❧ *Luke 10:25-37* ❧

- What words, phrases, or images catch your attention?
What questions did a verse raise for you?
Where do you find tension in the text?
What surprises you in the passages?
Does anything make you feel relieved? Excited?
What part of the story confuses you?
What part you think you need to sit with for a while?
- When have I walked away from a need that cried out to me?
Why did I do that?
- Who is the last person I would want to receive help from?
- T. W. Manson writes, “No definition of neighbor emerges from the parable: and for a very good reason. The question is unanswerable, and ought not to be asked. For love does not begin by defining its objects: it discovers them.”
When have I discovered a neighbor?
- Why does Jesus portray religious leaders as villains so often?
- Why does Jesus choose the most hated person as his hero?
What does this mean to us?
- How could I become the kind of mercy-showing person that has discovered the key to abundant life?

The Parable of the Sower

❧ *Mark 4:1-20* ❧

- What words, phrases, or images catch your attention?
What questions did a verse raise for you?
Where do you find tension in the text?
What surprises you in the passages?
Does anything make you feel relieved? Excited?
What part of the story confuses you?
What part you think you need to sit with for a while?
- These four soils are located in one field. How is it possible to live with all four of these types of soils in one's heart at once?
What does that look like in your life?
- When am I like hard soil—unreceptive and not wanting to hear from God?
- What do I find most difficult about following Christ?
When does my faith wither or my enthusiasm fade?
- What good things can keep us from growing spiritually?
- When do I feel like good soil?
- What does God want me to hear from this story?

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

✧ *Matthew 20:1-15* ✧

- What words, phrases, or images catch your attention?
What questions did a verse raise for you?
Where do you find tension in the text?
What surprises you in the passages?
Does anything make you feel relieved? Excited?
What part of the story confuses you?
What part you think you need to sit with for a while?
- What is this story telling us about who God is?
- What would it take for us to entertain the possibility that the unfairness that seems obvious to us in this passage doesn't indicate a problem with Jesus or the story, but with us?
- Why does God's generosity to all bother us?
- If Jesus just told you this story, and asked you what you think of it, what would you say?
- Do we love receiving grace more than we love extending it? Why?
- What helps you see yourself from God's perspective?

Evaluating this Project

Group Leader Pre-Writing Project Survey

Please complete the survey online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PS78R3J>

1. How much background material would be helpful for you to have when leading the group?
2. Do you think Christian education and spiritual formation share the same purpose? How do they differ? How do they overlap?
3. What challenges might you face in this project?
4. What questions do you have about leading a writing group?
5. What are your hopes for the participants in this experience? What are your hopes for yourself?
6. What do you want a curriculum guide to provide for this experience?
7. What do you want to learn about using writing as a tool for spiritual formation?

Group Leader Post-Writing Project Survey

Please complete the survey online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/67RKRQC>

1. Did you use the background information for the group leader? If yes, did you find it to be more material than you needed to use, less material than you needed, or adequate for your conversations?
2. How was this similar to a group Bible study? How was it different?
3. What challenges did you face in guiding your group through this project? Were there challenges around the writing? The discussion?
4. What questions arose from this process? Were they different questions than you started with? Explain.

5. Did this experiment meet your expectations? Was it what you hoped it would be? Explain.
6. As the writing group leader, what else did you need from the curriculum guide to make the sessions more effective for your participants?
7. What did you learn about using writing as a tool for spiritual formation?
8. Provide the details of your writing group:
 - Age range of participants
 - Location
 - Dates and times
 - Number in group
 - Length of sessions
9. Describe how you structured the sessions in terms of participants' writing and discussion. For example, did the participants do the writing at home and then share in class? Did they only write in the sessions but not at home? How much time was spent writing and how much time used for sharing?
10. How did you structure your project in regards to the parables? For example, did you focus on a different parable each session? Did you focus on one parable the entire project? Explain the reasons for these choices.

Participant Pre-Writing Project Survey

Please complete the survey online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/5SQQZ9Y>

1. What do you hope to learn or experience through this experiment?
2. Describe your relationship to writing (i.e. “I have journaled for years; I write for work; I’m curious about writing, etc.)
3. Why did you say yes to participating in this group?
4. How often do you participate in Bible studies?
5. What concerns *do* you have about this experience?

Participant Post-Writing Project Survey

Please complete the survey online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/5NF7ZJN>

1. What did you learn or experience through this experiment?
2. What about this experience surprised you?
3. What did or did not meet your expectations? Explain.
4. What would have improved this experience for you?
5. How was this similar to a Bible study experience for you? How was it different?
6. Consider your concerns before the experience. What are your thoughts now?
7. Would you participate in another writing group?
8. Will you use writing during Bible reading time at home?

Reflections Devotion

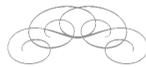
Exodus 3:1-6

How many times do we overlook amazing sights?

Maybe we're preoccupied. We're walking by and working out the details of what we need to do next. Or we're driving down the road as we replay a conversation in our minds, wondering exactly what that remark meant. Perhaps we spend our days moving from point A to point B as if we're on autopilot. Then we realize at the end of the day that we never looked up or saw anything new.

Being attentive affects our spiritual well-being. Our days can shine. We may witness stunning acts of sharing that will surprise us when we see them. God's beauty, in its variety of forms, may come into view and take our breath away. A simple walk could turn into a prayer of gratitude. "I think God is always trying to tell us things," my friend Rebecca confidently tells me. When we realize the truth of this, we find ourselves on holy ground.

I love the sequence of events in verse 4: *When the LORD saw that he was coming to look, God called to him.* Apparently, God pays attention to the fact that Moses is paying attention. God responds to Moses' sense of wonder and leads him into an experience more amazing than that initial, strange sight that grabbed his interest. What if Moses had been lost in thought, not bothering to look up and notice that this flaming bush was not burning up? What if he simply glanced at the sight, then dismissed it? Instead, his curiosity leads him to look, ask questions, and move closer to the place where God will speak to him.



Consider

Think about the last few weeks. What may God have been trying to tell you that you might have missed?

Pray

Help me keep my eyes open, God, and move me closer to those places where you will draw nearer. Amen.